

SERMON – 9/3/25
'The Temptations of Jesus'

Luke 4:1-13

“Jesus returned from the Jordan full of the Holy Spirit and was led by the Spirit into the desert, where he was tempted by the Devil for forty days.” (Luke 4:1,2)

As we enter into the season of Lent and begin to turn our eyes towards the Cross of Christ, our reading this morning actually takes us right back to the very beginning of Jesus ministry when, immediately after His baptism in the River Jordan, the Lord undergoes a wilderness experience of very severe testing. Known as the Temptations of Jesus, they last for 40 days, a period that is at the root of the church's discipline of Lent, although the word 'lent' actually refers to the lengthening of daylight at this time of year.

What I would like to explore with you this morning is the theme of spiritual battle that underlies both the temptation of Jesus and the struggle that we all have to keep to the straight and narrow path of Christian discipleship. Whether we are observing any lenten discipline or not, we are all called to follow Jesus and we should not be surprised that sometimes our journey of discipleship takes us into hard places.

Right at the very outset I want to highlight the fact that it was immediately after Jesus' baptism that Jesus was led *by the Spirit* into the desert. He had just experienced the Holy Spirit descending upon Him like a dove and heard a voice from on high saying 'This is my Son whom I love, with Him I am well-pleased' – a phrase that was repeated in the hearing of Peter, James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration as we saw last Sunday – surely a real high-point in His life. And we should also be prepared for it to be at those times when we feel at our closest to God that trouble is most likely to come. But while we may be tempted by the Devil as Jesus was, we are assured in the letter of James that God will not allow us to be tested beyond our ability to endure, so hold on firmly to that promise when you feel that you are under pressure in your attempt to follow Christ.

Talking about spiritual warfare or about the Devil is perhaps not the most popular of sermon topics and maybe it makes you feel a little uncomfortable. That's understandable, but on the basis that forewarned is forearmed and that prevention is better than cure, I make no excuse for taking this theme, because I don't want any of you to be unprepared for an assault from the Evil One.

There is much more in the Bible about evil than you might imagine and about the personification of evil under the name of Satan, which means 'accuser' or 'deceiver'. In the opening chapters of Genesis we find Satan taking the form of a serpent and deceiving Adam and Eve into disobeying God. (Genesis 3) The first chapter of the Book of Job describes how Satan asks God's permission to test a righteous man to try and show that people only trust God when things are going well. (Job 1) In the Gospels we find Jesus telling the Pharisees: 'You belong to your father the Devil and you want to carry out your father's desire. When he lies, he speaks his native language for he is a liar and the father of lies.' (John 8:44) And in his first letter we find Peter warning his readers: 'Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the Devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.' (1 Peter 5:8) But perhaps the most important fact to grasp about the Evil One is that in the purposes of God he is finally defeated – in John's vision in the Book of Revelation, Satan is thrown into a lake of burning sulphur (Rev.20:10). God's power and authority hold sway eternally – that's important to hold onto in the midst of temptation. In the words of the hymn: 'Our great foe is baffled, Christ Jesus is King!' (William Plunket)

But with that by way of background, let's take a look this morning at the temptations of Jesus and at how temptation may come our way today.

The first thing to notice is that Satan chooses his moment. As I have said, it is immediately after Jesus' baptism, when His call has been powerfully confirmed and we are told that He is 'full of the Holy Spirit' (v.1) that the Devil comes to tempt Jesus. Right at the end of this morning's passage also, we read that 'When the Devil finished tempting Jesus in every way he left him for a while.' The NIV translation puts it this way: 'he left Him for an opportune time.' (v.13) Any of you who feel regularly assailed by

temptations or battles in your Christian living will know that they often seem to strike at moments of great significance – just when you are riding the crest of the wave, full of faith and with a sense that all is right with the world. We can never be complacent, for it is perhaps especially when we feel at our most confident that we are most likely to be tripped up. As Proverbs 16:18 says, 'Pride goes before a fall.'

How right Peter was to say 'Be alert!' because Satan will choose his moment to try and catch us unawares, whether we are experiencing great joy and think that nothing can possibly go wrong or whether we are already in the pit of despair and think that things can't get any worse. How we need to pray (for ourselves and for others): Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

So the Devil looks for an opportune time.

Secondly, one of Satan's fiercest tricks is to sow seeds of doubt. The Devil tries to make us question things that ought to be a matter of certainty to us. In our reading he begins by saying to Jesus: '*If you are the Son of God*, tell this stone to become bread.' (v.3) Remember, Jesus had only just heard the voice from heaven saying to Him, 'You are my Son, whom I love. With you I am well-pleased.' Yet here is Satan trying to sow seeds of doubt with that little word, 'if'. For us as Christians it can be particularly unsettling to hear a niggling voice casting doubt on aspects of our faith never mind on our standing in Christ. (Is that what the Bible really says? Surely you don't think that? What sort of Christian are you? Are you really a Christian at all?) My friends, those niggles are the voice of the Tempter, not the voice of God, and the very fact that such a thought has entered your head is confirmation that your strength of faith actually poses a threat to Satan's attempts to lead you away from God. Far from letting that kind of doubt make you wobble, be encouraged that you are considered a threat to the powers of evil and let it strengthen your faith instead.

So the Devil looks for an opportune time and he looks to sow seeds of doubt.

The third thing I want to point out to you is that Satan's primary aim is to tempt us to depart from the will of God. The great test to apply to any inclination you might have is to ask whether in doing it you would extend the Kingdom of God or whether you would dishonour the Lord in doing it. Satan asked Jesus to use His power as Son of God to turn a stone into bread. Now in the moment the temptation was a very powerful one since we are told that Jesus by this time was very hungry. But Jesus clearly recognised that it would be an abuse of the power He had been given from on high and so He resisted. He turns to God's Word – 'Man shall not live on bread alone.' (v4) And that must be our way too of weighing up the difference between a true calling of God and the temptation to leave the purposes of God behind and stride out in some sinful venture. If it takes you outside the will of God as it is revealed to us in Scripture, then it is the work of the Evil One and it must be resisted.

The fourth thing we need to be aware of if we are under attack from the powers of evil is that Satan tells lies. As we saw earlier, Jesus Himself describes the Evil One as a liar and the father of lies whose native language is to lie, and perhaps it is this experience of temptation in the desert that has led Jesus to that conclusion. In his second attempt to tempt Jesus, the Devil suggests that Jesus would be given authority over all the nations of the world if He simply bowed down and worshipped Satan instead of God. Wouldn't it have been wonderful, if Jesus had been enthroned as Lord the world over without having to go to the Cross. Except of course, that, tantalising as it might have sounded, authority over the world was actually not within Satan's gift and his sales pitch to Jesus was nothing but a whopper of a lie. All of us are likely to be taken in if we like the sound of what we are hearing, especially if we don't pause to question whether it is true or not. 'Watch and pray so that you are not led into temptation' Jesus told His disciples, but in the Garden of Gethsemane the Devil persuaded them that it wouldn't matter if they had forty winks because they were tired and in so doing they succumbed to the temptation not to pray and so they slept while Jesus wrestled with His destiny. What lies is the Evil One persuading you are true at this time, and what are the

consequences of believing him? Keep your wits about you, my friends, and hold firm to the truth of God's Word.

It is with Scripture that Jesus responds to the Devil's temptations each time, and that is a good example for us to follow. We need to be well-versed in God's Word if we are to hold firm to God's ways. But that takes me finally to the uncomfortable fact that in trying to deceive Jesus (and us) Satan even tries to use God's Word for his own purposes. In suggesting to Jesus that if He were to throw Himself from the highest point of the Temple the words of Psalm 91 would be fulfilled: "God will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands." (Ps.91:11-12) Satan appears to be encouraging Jesus to trust God – it all sounds so plausible and if it says it in the Bible it must be God's will – but in fact it is quoted inappropriately and out of context and (as Jesus perceives) Satan is actually trying to persuade Him to put God to the test not to trust Him.

At a time in history when many people sit very loosely to the truth, we need to heed Jesus' advice to us to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves (Matthew 10:16), for as the apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians, 'Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light' (2 Cor.11:14). We need to be constantly seeking the enabling of the Holy Spirit to handle God's Word correctly (2 Timothy 2:15) as Jesus Himself did and not to be led astray by the spirit of the age.

As we journey with Jesus these 40 days of Lent towards Holy Week and Easter may we recognise that we are engaged in a spiritual battle, may we put our efforts into knowing God better through His Word, and may we have grace to put on the whole armour of God as we stand against the Devil's schemes and remain close to Jesus every step of the way.